



Sermon Transcription • Abbotsford

Let's Pray - Dec. 30/31, 2017 - Greg Harris
Prayer and Providence - (Romans:26-28)

[Please Note: This transcript has been lightly edited for ease of reading. Also, some headings have been added in square brackets to aid the reader in locating portions of the sermon.]

My name is Greg and I am one of the pastors here. As you're well aware of, it's New Year's Eve and so you're probably in resolution mode. I've never been a big New Year's resolution kind of guy, but I know that with the turning of the calendar there comes that sense of, "Something new is coming, so let's re-prioritize and let's think about how this next year can look different than the year that just came." As a church we are actually kind of doing that this year. It's not so much a New Year's resolution, but we did want to spend the first few weeks of January digging into this topic of prayer. As a church one of our core values is to express our dependence on God through prayer and so it's our desire that 2018 would be a year that would show considerable growth in our lives as individuals, but also our life as a congregation in our prayer life, so that is why we are going to be spending the next few weeks looking at different passages in the scriptures that talk about prayer to help us grow in our prayer lives. So I am starting off our new sermon series and this first week was kind of a "preacher's choice," so they said, "Greg, just pick whatever you want to preach on and give it a go." That was great news for me because a few weeks ago, if you've been with us for the past few months you'll know, we were spending a lot of time in Romans and in particular we spent a few weeks in Romans 8. You might think to yourself, "Man, we covered everything we could in Romans 8. We turned it up and over and looked through it and it was great." Well, you're wrong. There is more in Romans 8. When I was preparing a talk for our Romans series in Romans 8, I was sitting at our sermon preview meeting (where we sit down as a preaching team with a bunch of other pastors and interns and stuff and we talk about what we plan on preaching on that weekend), and in my sermon in Romans 8 I had what was basically going to become my sermon this weekend, but I also wanted to preach then and they said, "Greg, you're going to kill everybody because the sermon is going to be two hours long and no one is going to be happy, so just don't do that then." I said, "Well, when will I get to preach this sermon?" And here we are.

So, we are a going to be spending some time in Romans 8:26-28, in particular. Let's read the passage. Here's what it says:

"In the same way, the Spirit helps us in our weakness. We do not know what we ought to pray for, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us through wordless groans. And he who searches our hearts knows the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for God's people in accordance with the will of God. And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose."



So here's the big idea that I want to have in your minds for this morning and as we go into this new year and as we're thinking about the topic of prayer, okay? Here's the big idea: God will accomplish his purpose for us through prayer. God will accomplish his purpose for us through prayer. We're going to be talking about that big idea in two main chunks:

First we're going to talk about prayer and then we're going to talk about God's purpose.

1. Prayer
2. God's Purpose

So we're going to look at this passage, see what it has to tell us about prayer, what it has to tell us about God's purpose and we're going to learn that God will accomplish his purpose for us through prayer, okay?

[Prayer]

So first, let's look at what this passage has to say about prayer. Romans 8:26 starts by saying,

“In the same way, the Spirit helps us in our weakness...”

So the first question we need to ask ourselves, as Bible students of this passage, is what is Paul actually referring to when he says, “In the same way...” It sounds like he's continuing a thought, right? So what was the thought that he's continuing? Well, let's look at the context. Romans 8:22,

“We know that the whole creation has been groaning as in the pains of childbirth right up to the present time. Not only so, but we ourselves, who have the firstfruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly as we wait eagerly for our adoption to sonship, the redemption of our bodies. For in this hope we were saved. But hope that is seen is no hope at all. Who hopes for what they already have? But if we hope for what we do not yet have, we wait for it patiently.”

So here's the context: Paul goes from saying, “What hope do we have? For what we do not yet have we wait for it patiently,” and then he says, “In the same way...” So Paul is saying, “Look, in this context, where you are in a time of difficulty, a time of trial, and yet you have this great hope yet to come, in the same way the Spirit helps us in our weakness.” So continuing with that idea of us living in a time of trial and awaiting a hope yet to come, the Spirit is here to help us in our weakness. That weakness does refer to what he just finished talking about, which is your struggles, your sorrows, your strife, but more specifically, the weakness that we experience as believers in this time of sorrow and struggle is what he says in Romans 8:26,

“In the same way, the Spirit helps us in our weakness. We do not know what we ought to pray for...”



So look, our weakness, as believers, is exponential. Here's what I mean by that: we are in seasons of our lives where we have some joys and we have some sorrows and we feel the sorrows and struggles probably more weighty than we feel the joys. So we're in a time of difficulty, and not only are we in a time of difficulty, but we don't even know how to pray in the midst of our difficulty. The situation that we find ourselves in is not only difficult, we don't know how to pray or what we ought to pray for in this time of difficulty.

I've talked about my son in the past. His name is Ben and I'll probably keep talking about him for as long as I'm preaching here. Ben has some supportive care needs, some special needs, some health challenges that he was born with and lives with. One of his challenges (he's a three year-old right now) is that he is still non-verbal. This doesn't mean to he doesn't make noise. He makes noise [laughter]. What I mean is he doesn't have words yet. So Ben's life situation at this point is that he knows he has needs, but he can't articulate those needs to us. Paul is saying that this is the experience of believers in times of difficulty. Not only are you in a time of difficulty, you know you have a need, but you don't know how to express that need. So we have exponential weakness. We're in a time of difficulty and we don't know what to pray for, but there's good news. Romans 8:26,

“In the same way, the Spirit helps us in our weakness. We do not know what we ought to pray for, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us through wordless groans.”

So that language of, “...through wordless groans” is a little tricky. Some people interpret it different ways. I think the best way to understand it is that we are the ones making the wordless groans. We don't know what to pray for, so our prayers are just these wordless groans, but the Spirit is interceding for us. We don't know what to say but the Spirit does.

So imagine that you've invited my wife and me and our son Ben over to your house for lunch (which is very kind of you, thank-you). We're at your place and my son is a little bit agitated, he's a little bit frustrated, and he's making wordless groans because that's what he does at this point still. You're sitting there thinking, “I have no idea what this child wants.” But Sarah, my wife, intercedes for Ben by asking me, “Can you go get his milk from the bag.” See, Ben didn't know how to express his felt-need, but Sarah interceded for him. This is what Paul says the Spirit does for us in our times of difficulty. When we hit times of sorrow and strife and difficulty, we don't even know what to pray for. We don't even know what to ask God to do in our situation. We just have these wordless groans and we ask for things without knowing if it's the right thing to ask for, but that's okay because the Spirit intercedes on our behalf. And not only is he interceding on our behalf, but Romans 8:27 tells us that,

“...the Spirit intercedes for God's people in accordance with the will of God.”

So he's always asking for the right stuff, the Holy Spirit.

So again, imagine I'm at your house and you invite us over for lunch and it was very kind of you and Benji is making a noise and Sarah says, “Greg, go get him the milk.” I bring him the milk and he is not happy with the milk. That was the wrong intercession. What he really wanted was Paw Patrol, which is



always the answer [laughter]. See, we, as his parents, will sometimes intercede wrongly. We will give voice to a different request than what he actually needs. Here's the good news about the Holy Spirit: he never gets it wrong. No matter what difficulty you face, you don't even know what to pray for in the face of your difficulty, the Holy Spirit will always, perfectly articulate to the Father what you need. Man, that should make you bold in your prayers, right? Because it doesn't even matter if you pray for the right thing. The Spirit is praying for you, perfectly.

Thomas R. Schreiner is the name of a theologian who wrote a commentary on the book of Romans and he said it probably more eloquently than I just gave it a go, so I'm going to read what he said, okay? He says,

“Since the Spirit intercedes in accord with God's will, his prayers are always answered. The prayer of believers is not always answered affirmatively [what we asked for] since we do not always know what God's will is. By contrast, the Spirit's prayers are always answered with a yes, precisely because he always prays in accordance with God's will. Believers should take tremendous encouragement that the will of God is being fulfilled in their lives despite their weakness and inability to know what to pray for. God's will is not being frustrated because of the weakness of believers. It is being fulfilled because the Spirit is interceding for us and invariably [always] receiving affirmative answers to his pleas.”

Listen friends, the Holy Spirit is interceding for us and that should make us bold in our prayers. See, what we tend to do with our prayers is we look at our sorrows, we look at our struggles and strifes and we don't present them as requests to God in prayer, instead what we do is we take them and we put them in a bottle and we keep the bottle and we look at the bottle. My wife made this toy for Ben and there is like gunk and glitter and colourful stuff in there and you're supposed to turn it over and you see all the glitter fall to the bottom and then you turn it back over. Ben is supposed to play with it, but I never give it to him because it's too cool and so I'm always looking at the bottle watching the stuff go down. This is what we do with our worries. We put them in a bottle, and instead of giving them to God because we are like, “I don't even know what to pray for,” we just put them in the bottle and just at them. “Look at all those worries. Look at all those struggles and sorrows that I have in my life. Here, come, come friends, look at the worry. Look at the bottle.” No, we should be more bold with our prayers. We should just say, “Look, I have these struggles, I have these worries, but instead of bottling them up and staring at them I am going to give them to my heavenly Father. Even if I don't know what to ask for, it's okay because the Spirit intercedes for me.”

Tim Keller wrote a book called *Prayer* and in this book he tells this story. While he was in seminary he is dating a certain woman and he really wants this relationship to work out because he thinks she's going to be the perfect spouse for him and his ministry. But the relationship starts going sideways and he's pleading with God that this relationship would not end because he needs her in ministry. Well, the relationship ended and a few months or years later he ends up meeting a new woman, named Kathy, and they eventually get married and now Tim and Kathy have been married for decades and have done ministry together in New York and you probably know the name Tim Keller. See, Tim was



pleading with God for a certain request but he didn't get what he asked for. Here's his reflections on that time in his life. He wrote this:

“God will either give us what we ask or give us what we would have asked if we knew everything he knew.”

In our prayers, in our situations, God is either going to give us what we ask or he will give us what we would have asked if we knew everything he knew. Who knows everything God knows? The Spirit. When we pray, even when we don't know what to pray for, the Spirit intercedes for us according to God's will for our life and God will answer the prayers of the Spirit every single time. That should make us bold in our prayers. We can't go wrong when we pray. Not only should it make us bold in our prayers, but it should encourage us in our prayers, right? Listen Christian, you who have repented of sin and believe the gospel and trust in Jesus for your salvation, here's what's true of you: you get to pray to the great God of the cosmos and the great God of the cosmos is praying for you. See, God's not just going to give you up to let you do whatever you want and to ask for whatever you want and leave you to your own devices and say, “Well, we will see if they can figure out what the right thing to ask for is. Oh, you wanted healing but you didn't ask for it in the right way? Sorry, man. You should have said these words and then it would have happened.” No, not only do we pray to the great God of the cosmos, the great God of the cosmos is praying for us. Here's how Keller writes it in his book *Prayer*. He says,

“The Spirit, even when you do not know how to pray, takes your core prayer and prays as you should be praying before the throne. When you struggle in prayer, you can come before God with confidence that he is going to give you what you would have asked for if you knew everything he knows. He does care, and he loves you boundlessly.”

One of the great examples of God's love for us is the fact that he, by his spirit, is praying for us, right? When you have dear friends and you are going through a trial and you are asking for help, what do you do? You text them and you say, “Can you pray for me?” What this passage is telling us is that the Spirit is praying for us. So that should make you want to pray more. As we pray, the Spirit intercedes on our behalf according to the will of God. He's so invested in your life and he loves you. He loves you enough to save you, he loves you enough to pray for you, he loves you enough to give you what you need for his will to be fulfilled. Our God loves us. God will accomplish his purpose for us through prayer. Our prayers and the Spirit's interceding on our behalf.

[God's Purpose]

But now let's think a little bit about God's purpose, because God will accomplish his purpose for us through prayer. So here's Romans 8:28:

“And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose...”



So Paul, here, is referring to those who love God. So what he is referring to is, he is saying, “This truth that all things will work together for your good is a truth for believers.” So if you are here today, this morning, and you have placed your trust in Christ for your salvation, you’ve repented of your sin, you know you need a savior and you trust Jesus as your Lord and Saviour, this is a promise for you. God will cause all things - that’s as generic and vague a word as you can pick in the Greek. All kinds of things in your life, God will work together for your good if you are called according to his purpose. So now the question is: well what’s his purpose? Right? He’s going to work things together for our good according to his purpose, so what’s his purpose? Well, let’s keep reading the passage. Romans 8 - we will start back in verse twenty-eight and we’ll keep going through thirty.

“And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose. For those God foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, that he might be the firstborn among many brothers and sisters. And those he predestined, he also called; those he called, he also justified; those he justified, he also glorified.”

Here’s the big idea I want you to think about from this passage: God’s purpose for you, believer, is not your temporal gains but your eternal glory. God’s purpose for your life, as a believer, is your ultimate glorification, your resurrected life in a new creation forever and ever. That’s his purpose for you and he will make all things in your life work together for that purpose.

So here’s a question we should ask ourselves, because we just read in Romans 8:26-27 that the Spirit is always perfectly interceding for us on our behalf in our difficult situations, yes? Okay, here’s the problem: then why do we still have sickness and sorrows? If the Spirit is the perfect prayer for us, then why is it that we still have sorrows and sickness in our life? It seems like God’s purpose for our life should include things like a lack of sickness and a lack of sorrow if he was actually a good God. That his purpose for our life should be temporal gains - good things here and now. This is why this passage is so important, is because we need to reorient our mindset to not be looking to the immediate, but to the eternal. That God’s purpose for you, believer, is your eternal glory, not your temporal gains. Don’t get me wrong, you should be praying for temporal gains. If you are sick, you should be praying for healing. If you’re sick, you can come to the elder’s to pray. James (the book of James) tells us that those who are sick should come to the elders, be anointed with oil, and God, through the prayers of the elders, might actually bring healing to that person. We’ve seen this take place in our church where people will come to our elders, be prayed for, and actually receive healing, praise God. If you’re sick, you should come to the elders. They meet on the fourth Tuesday of every month and they dedicate about an hour of time at each of their meetings to pray for people in the congregation. You should come and be prayed for. God might give you healing and that would be an amazing testimony of his grace, amen? But listen to me, even if you do and even if you are healed, it’s a temporary one. The greatest healing stories that you’ve ever heard are still temporary because eventually, unless the Lord returns, our bodies will decay and we will die. So all healings that we experience, as good as they are and as much as we should pray for them, they are temporary healings. God is not out for our temporary gain. He’s out for our eternal glory. That’s his purpose for us.



So look, we often look this time of year at our facebook feed (you're probably on it right now), scrolling through and you're seeing people post things like, "2017 was the worst! Worst year ever! 2018 is the year of Greg, man! It's all going to be better in 2018!" because the calendar turns and we think everything is going to be perfect and all of our problems will be solved, right? That the turning of the New Year brings with it hope. Actually, it's the coming of the new creation that brings hope. See, it's not the calendar being turned from one year to the other, its not the change of one year to the other that's going to bring joy and perfection, it's the turning of one decaying creation into a new, glorious, perfect creation that will bring us perfection and hope. God's purpose for our life is not temporal gains, it is our eternal glory.

Because look, if you think that God's purpose for your life is your temporal gains, then what you're going to be tempted to do in your life is call the things that happen to your benefit the 'God-moments,' right? "Man, it was a God-moment, I got the parking spot." "God-moment, got the scholarship. Didn't think I would. Did they see my grades? But I got it. Total God-moment." All the good things that happen to us, those are the God-moments if we think he's just out for our temporal gains, but the reality is that it's not just the good things that are God-moments, but all the moments are God's. He is a big, wise, smart God who is allowing and causing things to happen in our lives, both kind and difficult, for our ultimate good. To prepare us for our ultimate glory. God-moments aren't just reserved for things that are good, like if you get the healing or you get the girl or you get the job or the tree branch doesn't hit your house [laughter]. God-moments also include times when you're not healed and when the girl gets away and when you don't get the job and when the tree branch actually does crash through your ceiling. All those - God-moments. Under his wisdom they are in your life. He's either caused them or he's allowed them, but they are there under his (the word is) providence. See, we don't live a life because luck happens or because some impersonal determinism or fate happened, we have the life that we have because of God's providence. Now some things in our lives are really great and they are kind providences of God, but some of them are more difficult. They are all there and God is using all of them, he's working them all together, for our good, for our ultimate glory. Not our temporal gain, but our eternal glory.

Look, this is an idea -- one of the reasons I wanted to preach this is because this is a truth that I have had to soak in for a few years now. This idea that the providence of God is kind and difficult in our situations. I brought up my son in sermons before and I'll bring him up again. When he was a few weeks old he started having some seizures, so we brought him to Children's Hospital to try to figure out what was going on. It was at that time that we realized, or that I found out, that I actually had seizures when I was an infant. They were attached with fevers, more so than not, but I still had seizures when I was really young. So I started praying, "God, would you please, as an evidence of your grace to everybody that I get to talk to in my ministry, would you please just cause these seizures to not be anything else, right? I'm going to rally the troops. We're all going to be praying for my son so that it is not a big health issue, but that it's actually just something -- like I turned out kind of normal. So Lord, help it be something like that." So I'm praying this for weeks and weeks, I'm rallying the troops to pray that it's just nothing and that there are no medical factors underneath, that there are no long-term issues here, that it was just a one-off thing that could be an evidence of God's grace that he was healed. But, on one November morning, or actually one November afternoon, I'm in our office up



there in that other building, I'm sitting there and I'm working on a lesson that I was teaching that evening about a Church history class (we were talking about the reformation). On that particular evening I was teaching on John Calvin's view of God's sovereignty and providence over every single thing that happens in our life. And by God's providence, my phone rings and it's my wife on the other end of the phone telling me, "Greg, it's not nothing. It's actually something and it has a name and don't google it" (as I'm googling it). I see all the potential issues that could go wrong for my son and look, in that moment, I didn't feel a lot of grief because I was studying God's providence over every single situation. I thought, "This is an interesting twist of God's providence." One of the great tensions in my ministry so far was that evening, asking God, "Should I be telling this class that I just got this phone call or not? Because it's a bit raw for me." So I didn't know and I didn't end up telling them in that time because it was too fresh for me. I thought I had mostly processed it, and as a couple I thought we had mostly processed it, but actually, a few months later, after we had gotten the diagnosis, we had some company over to our condo and I was out there hosting and nailing it, killing it (it was awesome). Sarah was in Ben's room and he was having a rough night and so she was trying to soothe him to get him to sleep because he wasn't sleeping very well. She looked out and she saw all the fun that we were having out in the living room and she was stuck in Ben's dark bedroom trying to soothe him to sleep, but the longer she was in Ben's bedroom, the more her eyes adjusted to the room, and the more her eyes adjusted to the room, the greater her ability was to actually look into the face of what God had given us in our son. She told me, "Greg, I had this moment of great peace knowing that actually, Ben's amazing. Even though he didn't give me what I thought I would get, I got him." That's like a sermon illustration, right? It's great. I told Jeff, he stole it [laughter]. "That's my story!" See, I thought it was a really great moment and Sarah had an opportunity to kind of process it and I thought I had processed it too.

Well, fast-forward a few months later and we're at a conference in San Diego where we are meeting all the different families that we know of who have children with this same condition that my son has. I am literally looking at the spectrum and wondering where my son is going to be in the future. "Is he going to be like that kid? Is he going to be like that kid? I don't know." So we're at this conference and my wife is out one evening with all the other moms and they are out on a mom's night having a great time. The dads are in the hotel rooms with their kids. My son had just fallen asleep and I was reading a book. The book was called *The Life You Never Expected*, by Andrew and Rachel Wilson. The Wilsons have two autistic children and he is a Pastor in England and their life is not what they expected and this book is all about their reflections as parents with kids who have some supportive-care needs. As I'm reading this book, I'm reading this story that they tell about their experience as parents who have a child with supportive care needs and it is this: that it feels like you're sitting at a table with all of your friends after a great meal and the host comes out to give every single person dessert. As you see what all of your friends receive around the table, you realize that they were just given the best tasting unwrapped chocolate bar you can imagine, just sitting on their plate ready to be enjoyed. So you are sitting at your spot at the table thinking to yourself, "I'm going to get a chocolate bar." But you don't get a chocolate bar, you get an orange. Now look, oranges are sweet, they're great, but sometimes they are hard to peel - they've got that white stuff around it that's disgusting - and then you break off the little piece, and you eat the piece and there's a little seed or pip in there and that's not fun. It still tastes good, but it's a lot more work than the people who just mowed down their chocolate bar, right?



You like the orange, but you were expecting the chocolate bar. When I read that story I broke down in this hotel room because I realized that my issue wasn't with Benji having the condition he has, my issue and the reason why I was asking God, "Why me?" and "What if..." was because he didn't give me the life I expected. That was my problem for months, even though I knew the doctrine of God's providence over all situations, I was asking God, "What if he didn't have this? What would my life be like if this wasn't the case?" when in reality, what I was saying to God was, "You're not very smart in the providences in my life."

Look, when we ask, "What if..." we are just telling God, "I don't think you planned my life well. I don't think you know what it takes to get me to glory." Or, I started asking questions like, "Why me?" right? "Why does this have to happen to me?" when really, that's just us assuming that as Christians our life should be easy, right? See, I was believing two lies. I was believing the lie that our life should be easy, I was believing the lie that God doesn't know what he's doing, but here's actually the biblical truth: our lives will be difficult at times and God always knows what he's doing, and he will make all things work together for our good if we are called according to his purpose for us, which is our eternal glory.

So look, I don't know if in your life you think you've been given more chocolate bars or oranges, but what I do know, is that no matter what you've been given, don't ask yourself the question, "What if?" because that is you pretending you're a better god than God is. And don't ask yourself the question, "Why me?" because that is assuming that your life should be easy and God has never promised us an easy life here and now. Instead, ask the question, "What now?" "In light of my circumstances and God's providence in my life, what now?" "What is God trying to teach me about my sin and about my self-centeredness?" Look, my inclination in my own heart is towards narcissism and self-love. I assume I should get everything good in life and that everything is about me and God has been chipping away at my narcissism through my son because he knows that doesn't look like Jesus. Jesus looks like thinking about other people. See, what now? In your situation, what is God trying to teach you in the midst of the providences that he's placed you in? Maybe it's repentance over sin. Maybe it's trusting him more. I don't know what the lesson is for you in your life. I only knew what it was in mine, but what I do know, is that in light of the situations in our life, the question that we should be asking ourselves is, "God, in light of what you're doing, what do you want me to do now? How do I respond now? Because we know that you're going to work all things together for my good." Listen friends, I don't know what happened in your 2017. I don't know what happened then and I have no idea what 2018 is going to hold for you, but I do know this: that God will accomplish his purpose for us through prayer. So let's pray.

Father, I ask that you would grow in us, as individuals and as a church, a burning desire to pray. And we don't have to pray for the right things because we know your Spirit intercedes for us, but I pray that you would just overwhelm us with a desire to be lifting up every situation in our lives to you in prayer, expressing our dependency on you through prayer. As we look at all these different passages over the next few weeks of what prayer is and how we can grow in our prayer life, Father, would you encourage us that your Spirit prays for us and that all things will work together according to your purpose for us. We don't deserve this kind of hope, but you are so gracious to give it to us. You're good and you're



God and we ask that you would help us to learn that more in the days to come. We pray this for your fame and in Christ's name, amen.